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## THE VOCATION OF HOLINESS IN LATE ANTIQUITY

BY

ROBERT KIRSCHNER

### I

The transition from classical civilization to the world of late antiquity witnessed a discernible shift in the perception of the human person. From the corporate conditioning and pressures of the ancient city, the individual person emerged as the primary lens of human vision. "Henceforth," writes H. I. Marrou, "the norm and justification of all existence are to be found in man—man considered as an autonomous personality in his own right, achieving the realization of his being—beyond the self, perhaps, but certainly through the self ...".<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon of the holy man in the third and fourth centuries marked a still more pronounced shift of perception, from the individual still within society to the stranger removed from, and claiming to transcend entirely, the social structure of the ancient city. Power on earth was conferred upon a class of men who claimed power in heaven. The religious revolution of late antiquity was ignited by the holy man, for he signified the passing of spiritual power from the traditional community and its institutions to isolated human agents.

The present paper discusses the vocation of holiness in late antiquity with reference to the pagan philosopher, the Christian ascetic, and the rabbinic sage. It seeks to describe the basic dimensions of each model of holiness. Particular emphasis is laid upon the paradigmatic function of the holy man; that is, how he is perceived to epitomize or embody in his person the divine power ascribed to him.

### II

By the early third century the predominant force in Greco-Roman intellectual life was the amalgam of Platonic metaphysics and Pythagorean ascetic piety associated with the Neoplatonist succession.<sup>2</sup> The primary social function of the pagan holy man was the teaching of philosophy. Holiness was attributed to Plotinus and his successors

primarily because of the intrinsic sanctity of the intellectual tradition they preserved. Plato was the authoritative expositor of the divine mysteries. Familiarity with the upper world was, in effect, limited to those learned in his teachings. The veneration of Plato and Pythagoras was consonant with the abiding spiritual and intellectual traditionalism of Hellenistic culture. *Paideia* came to express a “metaphysical exaltation of cultural values ... invested with a kind of sacred radiance that gave it a special dignity of a genuinely religious kind.”<sup>3</sup> Thus to master *paideia* was to embark upon the pagan vocation of holiness.

A classical education became the discipline by which the philosopher internalized the “sacred radiance” of *paideia*. Prolonged study and contemplation required a degree of leisure and privilege confined to the select few. The material stature of the philosopher was significant: that he had freely chosen to use his secure social status for the purpose of philosophy was proof of his integrity and objectivity. He was perceived to stand outside of the conflicts of public life and the laws of patronage and advancement.<sup>4</sup> The holiness ascribed to him rested in part on his renunciation of worldly values and ambitions. While the content of his teaching was limited to philosophical circles, the impact of his *persona* surpassed them.

Mirrored in the philosopher’s social renunciation was his personal asceticism,<sup>5</sup> routinely characterized by celibacy and vegetarianism. According to their biographers, Pythagoras and Apollonius were less severe in this regard than Plotinus. Rigors of diet and physical denial were techniques by which Plotinus sought to liberate the higher self from the human accidentals of consciousness such as the body. Only by purifying the soul of its attachment to the body could one aspire to the divine truth latent in the structures of the world. In the view of Plotinus, learning, contemplation and physical austerity were the tools by which one might achieve divine assimilation.<sup>6</sup> Porphyry claims that Plotinus attained this exalted state four times during the six years of their association in Rome.<sup>7</sup> With Iamblichus, theurgy too came to be regarded as part, or perhaps the ultimate measure, of a holy man’s expertise.

Pagan holiness conferred certain extraordinary skills. According to Porphyry, Plotinus could defeat spells of sorcery, detect a thief on sight, and foretell the future.<sup>8</sup> Marinus testifies that Proclus could produce rain and predict earthquakes.<sup>9</sup> Eunapius relates that Iamblichus frequently worked miracles and summoned spirits. His

slaves reported that when he prayed he soared ten cubits above the earth where he was transfigured with light.<sup>10</sup> In the presence of his disciples he touched the surface of a spring, uttered an incantation, and raised a boy from the depths of the water. Even those who “distrusted other signs were converted by the experience of the actual revelation.”<sup>11</sup>

That Iamblichus and Proclus were seen primarily as *hieratikoi* as distinct from the *philosophoi* Plotinus and Porphyry may explain the emphasis on their supernatural skills. As a rule, however, the powers attributed to the pagan holy man depend upon the degree of divinity ascribed to him by his biographer.<sup>12</sup> In Porphyry’s *Vita Plotini* the philosopher is like a god; in his *Vita Pythagorae*, the philosopher is a god. Thus Porphyry suggests that Pythagoras, while nominally the son of Mnesarchus, was truly the son of Apollo.<sup>13</sup> No such claim is made for Plotinus.<sup>14</sup> So great were the powers of Pythagoras that they beggar description:<sup>15</sup>

Ten thousand other things yet more marvelous and more divine are told about the man ... To put it bluntly, about no one else have greater and more extraordinary things been believed.

Iamblichus too describes Pythagoras in such terms. Concluding that the master was at least intimately related to Apollo, Iamblichus speaks of Pythagoras’ “certain ineffable divinity.”<sup>16</sup> According to Damascius’ *Vita Isidori*, Isidore attributed a like status to Porphyry, Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus, and unspecified others who, since their time, had accumulated the requisite divine knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

The vessels of the philosopher’s divinity were his disciples. The disciple’s fervent attachment to the master was characteristic of classical education. Not only was the master the source of wisdom but the object of loyalty and imitation. In his discourse “On Homer and Socrates,” Dio Chrysostom describes the disciple’s task:<sup>18</sup>

For whosoever really follows anyone surely knows what the person was like, and by imitating his acts and words he tries as best he can to make himself like him. But that is precisely, it seems, what the pupil does—by imitating his teacher and paying heed to him he tries to acquire his art.

In late antiquity the relationship between master and disciple appears to have assumed a unique intensity. The disciples of Iamblichus “hung on to him as though by an unbreakable chain.”<sup>19</sup> Plutarch called Proclus his child,<sup>20</sup> and disciples gave to their own children the name of their master. The disciple embraced the master’s personal example as much

as his wisdom: “La philosophie n’était pas essentiellement un savoir à assimiler ni un simple objet d’étude, mais l’occasion d’un choix de vie.”<sup>21</sup> The disciple sought a share of the philosopher’s holiness by emulation, which began with observation.

The holiness of the philosopher was visible. Porphyry pays careful attention to the master’s face:<sup>22</sup>

When he (Plotinus) was speaking his intellect visibly illuminated his face: always of winning presence, he became at these times still more engaging: a slight moisture gathered on his forehead; he radiated benignity.

Although Plotinus refused to sit for a portrait, calling his body merely “an image of an image,” his disciple Amelius brought an artist to observe the master furtively so that he might capture “his most striking personal traits.”<sup>23</sup> In Eunapius’ *Lives of the Philosophers*, every aspect of the philosopher’s appearance and behavior bears scrutiny: his appearance, posture, demeanor, health, timbre of voice, etc.<sup>24</sup> Upon first meeting Isidore in Athens, writes Damascius, Proclus immediately discerned the young man’s inner holiness by his outward appearance:<sup>25</sup>

Über Isidoros aber kam angesichts des Proklos, dessen Erscheinung einen zugleich ehrwürdigen und bedeutenden Eindruck auf ihn machte ... Denn auch Proklos bewunderte das Antlitz und das Äussere des Isidoros: So gotterfüllt und innerlich voll philosophischen Lebens kam es ihm vor.

In pagan biography the philosopher’s eyes are held to be particularly revealing. So minute is Damascius’ attention to Isidore’s eyes that he can describe their rotation:<sup>26</sup>

Sie befanden sich, rund heraus gesagt, zugleich in ruhigem Stillstand und in schneller Bewegung, indem sie sich in demselben Punkte und um denselben Punkt drehten.

Among the Pythagoreans, writes Iamblichus, to watch the master at close proximity was a privilege reserved for the elect. Initiation to discipleship began with hearing the master. It culminated with direct sight:<sup>27</sup>

These probationers, those who appeared to be worthy to participate of his dogmas ... then became Esoterics, and both heard and saw Pythagoras himself within the veil. For prior to this they participated of his words through hearing alone, beyond the veil, without at all seeing him...

Iamblichus portrays Pythagoras as a holy exemplar through whose person and qualities the divine becomes visible:<sup>28</sup>

He (Pythagoras) apprehended that other men ought to be satisfied in looking to him, and the gifts he possessed, and in being benefited and corrected through images and examples, in consequence of their inability to comprehend truly the first and genuine archetypes of things. Just, indeed, as to those who are incapable of looking intently at the sun, through the transcendent splendor of his rays, we contrive to exhibit the eclipses of that luminary ...

The philosopher becomes divine by his likeness to God.<sup>29</sup> Porphyry describes an ambition of utter absorption in the divine:<sup>30</sup>

En toute action, tout œuvre, tout parole, aie le sentiment de la présence de Dieu, qui observe et qui veille. Tout ce que nous faisons de bien, tenons-en Dieu pour auteur.

In Marinus' *Vita Procli*, observation of the master bathing in the sea constitutes a kind of divine revelation:<sup>31</sup>

... Proclus dipped himself into the sea without hesitation, every month ... and so he observed, without ever failing, these austere habits of which he had, so to speak, made himself a law.

Proclus is described as a living, visible epiphany whose conduct describes the sacred.

### III

While the philosopher's authority proceeded from the traditional culture of the governing class, the Christian ascetic was rooted in "the zone of anti-culture,"<sup>32</sup> the desert. The holiness of the ascetics who inhabited the fringes of the settled communities of the eastern Mediterranean was defined in part by their removal from society and their identification with the humble. To the ancient Egyptian remedy of *anachoresis*, flight from failure and responsibility by relocation, the Christian ascetic imparted a radical social signification.<sup>33</sup> He effectively disengaged himself from earthly society. By this act he earned the status of the unearthly, the holy. The Egyptian monk and the Syrian saint stretched the pagan conception of holiness beyond its limits: the philosopher's renunciation of social ambition was transformed into the ascetic's renunciation of society itself; the philosopher's physical austerities were transformed into the ascetic's unremitting mortifications; the philosopher's knowledge of demons was transformed into the ascetic's war upon them.

For the Christian holy man, the center of spiritual gravity was found in the abandonment of those social and cultural norms which had shaped the philosopher's vocation. In most respects he appeared as the

antithesis of the urban citizen of classical antiquity. He lived in the desert or in the mountains, in caves or on pillars. He evidenced neither physical beauty nor athletic prowess nor cultivated intellect. He emphatically refused a public career: Palladius reports that when Timotheus, archbishop of Alexandria, sent envoys to the monk Ammonius of Nitria for the purpose of ordaining him a bishop,

He (Ammonius) pleaded with them and solemnly swore that he would not accept the election, that he would not leave the desert. They did not give in to him. Then while they were looking on he took a pair of shears and cut off his left ear, right back to the head, and he said: "And from now on be assured that it is impossible for me, as the law forbids a man with his ear cut off to be ordained priest."

When the persistent envoys returned, Ammonius threatened to cut out his tongue.<sup>34</sup> A Palestinian monk jumped off a roof to avoid ordination by the patriarch of Jerusalem.<sup>35</sup> The "citizenship of the heavens" of which Athanasius speaks<sup>36</sup> prohibited to the monk the rewards of social stature as well as the cares of public life.

This is not to say that the holy man had no social role. Particularly in the villages of the Syrian countryside during the fourth and fifth centuries, his anomalous status bestowed upon him the significant role of rural patron.<sup>37</sup> As a stranger to society, he became the ideal mediator of lawsuits, feuds, and disputes over taxes and debts. Yet the power to perform this function flowed from his ultimate vocation: to pass beyond the boundaries of ordinary life, to become "a man dead to human motivation and dead to human society."<sup>38</sup>

The Christian holy man shunned virtually everything needed by ordinary people. Symeon Stylites (ca. 396-459) was reported neither to eat nor drink.<sup>39</sup> If the holy man was not altogether impervious to mortal requirements of nourishment, then he ate infrequently and avoided cooked food. Palladius writes of a certain Elpidius who for twenty-five years ate only on Sundays and Saturdays: "He reached such a high degree of mortification and so wasted away his body that the sun shone through his bones."<sup>40</sup> Nor did the ascetic require the sleep of ordinary men: Anthony "often passed the entire night without sleep";<sup>41</sup> the Syrian stylites, if they slept at all, refused to lie down until extreme old age.<sup>42</sup> Shelter was another necessity from which the holy man was exempt. He lived in some natural cavity such as a cave or a hollow tree. It was claimed that Symeon Stylites dwelled for forty years on the top of a fifty foot pillar in the mountains outside Antioch. Other stylites simply stood in the open.<sup>43</sup> What clothing the holy man possessed was

minimal. Owing to its constant contact with the wearer it was thought to absorb his powers. Before his death Anthony carefully dispensed his sheepskin, cloak and hair shirt; Athanasius, the proud inheritor of one of the garments, “keeps it safe like some great treasure. For even seeing these is like beholding Anthony, and wearing them is like bearing his admonitions of joy.”<sup>44</sup> The Byzantine saint Symeon the Younger was reported to have spent eight months on top of his pillar, naked.<sup>45</sup>

By the deliberate choice of such hardships, the Christian holy man sought to achieve *apatheia*, defined by Evagrius as “the health of the soul ... the very flower of *ascesis*.”<sup>46</sup>

The proof of *apatheia* is had when the spirit begins to see its own light, when it remains in a state of tranquility in the presence of the images it has during sleep, and when it maintains its calm as it beholds the affairs of life.

The purpose of *apatheia* is to arm the ascetic for the task of contending with demons:<sup>47</sup>

There are two peaceful states of the soul. The one arises from the natural basic energies of the soul and the other from the withdrawal of the demons ... The monk who preserves intact the territory of the first state will perceive with greater sensitivity the raids made upon it by the demons.

Should you then be able, as the saying has it, to drive out a nail with a nail, you can know for certain that you stand near the confines of *apatheia*, for your mind is strong enough to abolish thoughts inspired by the demons with human thoughts.

Anthony emerged from twenty years of isolated warfare with demons “as though from some shrine, having been led into divine mysteries and inspired by God.”<sup>48</sup> The capacity to conquer demons galvanized supernatural skills of startling power. Having proved himself in combat, Anthony immediately went forth and crossed a canal full of crocodiles.<sup>49</sup> So potent was a curse dispatched by the Syrian saint Jacob of Nisibis that it blew up a boulder.<sup>50</sup> A sleepy Egyptian monk could set a field of grain on fire merely by getting to his feet.<sup>51</sup> To entertain beggars, Symeon Stylites would shatter glass by making the sign of the cross.<sup>52</sup> Pachomius could make himself invisible<sup>53</sup> and possessed the clairvoyant power of knowing what transpired at a distance.<sup>54</sup> The holy man could instantaneously heal physical or mental affliction by touch or by prayer. Symeon the Younger occasionally resurrected the dead<sup>55</sup> and was reported to have been in more than one place at the same time.<sup>56</sup>

Pierre Hadot has suggested a certain congruity of vocation between the philosopher and the monk: both are athletes of the spirit who seek to



train their souls much as an athlete trains his body.<sup>57</sup> Indeed the ancient monastic literature frequently refers to the holy man as “the athlete of Christ.”<sup>58</sup> Nonetheless he is to be distinguished from the philosopher in a crucial respect: his vocation is pre-eminently an imitation of Christ, a divinity whose earthly career was not paradigmatic to the pagan. In his celibacy, his identification with the poor, his sufferings, his confrontations with demons, his night-long prayer vigils and his miraculous healings, the Christian holy man conforms to a highly specific model.<sup>59</sup> In the *Vita Prima Graeca* of Pachomius, the image of *imitatio Christi* is compelling:<sup>60</sup>

After he (Pachomius) said these prayers, he stayed up through the night, weeping and repeating the same prayers until daybreak. From his sweat—for it was summer and the place was very hot—what was beneath his feet became like mud. He was also in the habit of stretching his arms out in prayer, without folding them soon again in to a resting position but rather keeping them stretched out, as if on the cross, in order to force the body to labor and stay awake for prayer.

As in the case of the philosopher, the Christian holy man’s personal conduct and demeanor were carefully observed by his disciples. According to the fourth century monk Paphnutius, thought must translate into action:<sup>61</sup>

For the faithful and good man must think the thoughts sent by God; he must speak what he thinks and act according to what he says. For if the way a person lives is not in accord with the truth of his words, then such a person is like bread without salt ... For (Job) says (cf. Job 4:2), “Is bread eaten without salt?” And is there taste in empty words, which are not fulfilled by testimony of the deed?

If the deeds of the monk were the true index of his sanctity, then his example defined the content of holiness. Pachomius indoctrinated his first three disciples by example rather than by precept: preparing the table, sowing and watering the vegetables, answering the door, ministering to the sick; and it was by his example that he earned the disciples’ devotion:<sup>62</sup>

Now we see that God’s goodness is clearly upon this our father, because, although born of pagan parents, he came to revere God so much and to be clothed in his commandments. Therefore we too, and all others, can follow him ...

When Isaac of the Cells requested orders of Theodore of Pherme, he received the indirect reply: “At present I say nothing to him. But if he will, what he sees me doing he will also do himself.” To the recipient of a similar request, another Egyptian ascetic advised: “Be to them a

pattern, not a legislator.”<sup>63</sup> Upon the death of Theodore, Athanasius urged the distraught monks not to weep but rather to emulate the example of Theodore’s life.<sup>64</sup>

The holy man’s example was followed in detail by careful imitation:<sup>65</sup>

For a long time, in fact for about fifteen years, whenever he (Pachomius) wanted to give his body rest and sleep after the weariness of a prayer vigil, he did it by sitting on something in the middle of the room, without leaning his back against the wall. When many of the fathers of those old days heard or rather saw this, they themselves tried the same or similar means of mortifying the flesh in order to enhance the salvation of their souls.

Palladius relates an account of Anthony’s encounter with a certain Paul, who wished to become a monk.<sup>66</sup>

After the twelve prayers they settled down to eat, it being quite late. Anthony ate one of the biscuits, but did not partake of a second. But the old man (Paul) was eating his small biscuit slowly, and Anthony waited until he finished and said: “Eat another one, too, father.” Paul replied: “If you eat one, so will I; if you do not, neither will I.” Anthony said: “I have had enough; I am a monk.” Said Paul, “I have had enough, too, for I wish to be a monk.”

According to the introduction of the *Vita Antonii*, the popular request for Athanasius to record Anthony’s life was occasioned by the hope “that you also might lead yourselves in imitation of him.”<sup>67</sup> If imitation of such a holy man was beyond ordinary capacity, just to be near him was to receive instruction in holiness.<sup>68</sup>

A fourth-century Egyptian monk observed with minute attention how a certain Abba Athre cut up a fish:<sup>69</sup>

He was holding the knife in the act of cutting up the fish and Abba Or called him. He left the knife in the middle of the fish and did not cut up the rest of it.

To the observer this demonstrated Abba Athre’s obedience; for the present inquiry, it shows how closely the holy man was watched. Visible holiness attracted attention. Describing the young Anthony’s temptation by the devil, Athanasius speaks of “those who watched”, somehow “aware of the bout that occupied them both.”<sup>70</sup> Of Symeon Stylites it was said that in bowing before God from the top of his pillar, he touched his toes 1,244 times;<sup>71</sup> “earnest disciples” reported that in twenty-five years Elpidius never once turned his gaze to the west.<sup>72</sup> In both cases the holy man’s movements are visually monitored to a degree that, while taxing belief, testifies to the power ascribed to his person. It is to *see* the holy man that the disciple seeks.<sup>73</sup> Searching for John of Lycopolis in the Nitrian desert, Evagrius was reported to have said:<sup>74</sup>

Gladly would I learn what kind of man he is from the testimony of one who knows how to interpret mind and speech. Since I myself cannot see him (emphasis added), I could hear exactly from another man of his way of life, but I shall not go so far as the mountain.

Pachomius' first disciples concluded that "even in silence his action was eloquent."<sup>75</sup> Palladius relates that when Macarius of Alexandria was admitted to the monastery of Tabennisi,<sup>76</sup>

Whenever he went out for his own need, he came back quickly and stood there, speaking to no one, not opening his mouth, but standing in silence. Except for the prayer in his heart and the palm leaves in his hands, he did nothing. All of them saw this and quarreled with the superior and said: "Where did you get this bodiless man for our condemnation? Either throw him out or know that we are leaving." Having noticed his way of life, Pachomius prayed to God that it might be revealed to him who this might be.

In this instance the holiness of Macarius is evident even to those who see him do *nothing*.<sup>77</sup> So completely had the ascetic embraced the holy that his very silence expressed it.

Having passed beyond human society and the human condition, the Christian holy man spoke powerfully to both. By departing from the flawed orbit of ordinary men, by waging heroic battle against the demons, he recovered the primeval perfection of Adam that existed before the fall from grace. His arduous and unearthly vocation made him visibly holy.

#### IV

Unlike pagan philosophers and Christian holy men, the rabbis of Palestine and Babylonia had no biographers. What can be learned about their vocation must be extracted from the vast legal and exegetical corpora of late antique rabbinic literature, including Mishnah and Tosefta (ca. 200), the Talmuds of Palestine (ca. 400) and Babylonia (ca. 500), and the tannaitic and amoraic Midrashim (ca. 500). While this literature comprises a rich record of the inner life of an intellectual elite, it offers nothing to compare to the hagiographies of other religious systems of late antiquity. The legal dicta and exegetical remarks attributed to various masters, as well as the narratives purporting to describe events in their careers, are dispersed throughout rabbinic literature in documents of assorted form and provenance. Owing to the juristic character of the texts and the corporate, consensual method of their transmission, rabbinic biography is problematic.<sup>78</sup> Yet even if

individual portraits are not feasible, a description of the paradigmatic rabbi emerges from the sources in clear relief.

Rabbinic Judaism's basic premise is that only part of the divine revelation at Sinai was recorded in Scripture. The unwritten revelation was preserved by the biblical heroes, prophets and their successors until it was inherited by the rabbis.<sup>79</sup> The entire Torah, written and unwritten, was studied and implemented by the sages for the sake of Israel's salvation. So definitive of Israel's mission was the rabbi's vocation that it was retrojected into the past: Moses is called "our rabbi"; King David studies Torah in rabbinic fashion; even the heavenly hosts are organized as rabbinical academies. Historical events in the first century C.E. only confirmed the rabbinic claim to primacy. Rather than marking the end of Israel's divine election, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (70 C.E.) came to signify to the rabbis that the mantle of the priesthood had been passed to them. The holiness of the Temple cult was now transferred to the entire community of Israel, whose life was sanctified by rabbinic teaching and example. On the premise of inalienable divine election, the sages constructed a juristic model of holiness to replace the cultic one. This task occupied them for centuries to come.

From the end of the second century the Palestinian sage fulfilled two social functions: the teaching of Torah to disciples, and local leadership in many areas of public affairs. In the first centuries C.E. the sages seem to have comprised a largely aristocratic and professional class with a specified role in civic life. However, the tendency to regard the rabbinic vocation as a mere professional craft was roundly condemned.<sup>80</sup> To teach Torah was considered a holy privilege and divine commandment. Rabbinic ordination did not bestow formal duties but merely the competence to offer public instruction, issue halakhic rulings, and adjudicate lawsuits. Ordained sages generally wished to avoid judicial responsibilities<sup>81</sup> in favor of Torah study, but communal duties were often imposed upon them by the Patriarchate.<sup>82</sup>

The rabbinical movement first appeared in Babylonian Jewry when Palestinian refugees from the failed revolt of 132-35 established their schools in Nisibis and Huzal and resumed the studies they had pursued in Palestine. While political power over the Jewish community belonged to the Exilarchate, the sages eventually gained control of the Jewish courts. Acting under the Exilarch's authority, the Babylonian sages adjudicated civil and administrative matters. Capital cases, although discussed in the Talmud, appear to have been reserved for Sasanian jurisdiction.<sup>83</sup>

In both Babylonia and Palestine, the rabbinical schools were devoted primarily to Torah study. "R. Zevid said: He (who studies Scripture and Mishnah) is worthy of inheriting two worlds, this one and the one to come ..." <sup>84</sup> Torah study came to be conceived of as more than a cognitive exertion. Apart from the information to be mastered, the act of study itself was considered a kind of sacrament, a participation in divine revelation. Torah and commandments shielded from death. <sup>85</sup> To study was to be rendered immune: <sup>86</sup>

As for R. Hisda, he (the angel of death) could never overcome him, for his mouth was never silent from rehearsing his learning. So he (the angel of death) went and settled on the cedar tree of the academy. The tree cracked. R. Hisda (presumably startled) stopped (studying), and he (the angel of death) overcame him.

Study was the centerpiece of a more comprehensive curriculum of holiness. Like other holy communities, the schools invested certain modes of thought and conduct with sacramental power. To be a rabbi was a kind of divine ritual. <sup>87</sup> To learn from a master and to emulate his personal example was to conform to the divine image conveyed by Torah.

This conception of the rabbinic sage dictated that the disciple's first duty was to his master, even before his own father. Thus if he went to seek the lost property of his father and that of his master,

the master's has first place, for his father only brought him into this world, but his master that taught him wisdom (HKMH) brings him into the world to come.

Similarly if his father and his master each carry a burden, the disciple must relieve his master first; if both are taken captive, he must ransom his master before his father unless his father too is a sage. <sup>88</sup> When listening to the master's discourse, the disciple was to sit bent over. <sup>89</sup> To cough or spit in the master's presence was a serious offense. <sup>90</sup> One who presumed to render a halakhic decision in the presence of his master deserved to die. <sup>91</sup> Upon departing the master's presence, the disciple was never to turn his back but to turn his face sideways. When his teacher R. Johanan would leave, R. Eleazar b. Pedath would not dare to raise his eyes until the master was out of sight. <sup>92</sup> It was the dictum of R. Eleazar b. Shammua that "fear of the master (should be) as the fear of heaven." <sup>93</sup>

Like any late antique holy man, the rabbinic sage could bless and curse with immediate consequence. He could interpret signs and wonders, cast an evil eye, and consort with the dead. He was clair-

voyant. Empowered by the study and observance of Torah, he could drive out the princess of demons:<sup>94</sup>

(?Igrath, daughter of Maḥalath, queen of demons) once met Abaye. She said to him: "Had they not proclaimed concerning you in heaven, 'Take heed of Naḥmani and his Torah,' I should have endangered you." He replied: "If I am important in heaven, I order you never to pass through inhabited areas."

With a glance he could induce famine; by removing his shoe he could bring rain.<sup>95</sup> Having been excommunicated by a rabbi, a band of thieves told their friends that for twenty-two years they had failed every attempt to steal.<sup>96</sup> Power emanated from the sage like a magnetic field, extending even to his household: "The daughters of R. Naḥman used to stir a cauldron with their hands when it was boiling hot ..."<sup>97</sup> He could resurrect the dead (or near-dead):<sup>98</sup>

Rabbah and R. Zera feasted together on Purim. They became drunk, and Rabbah arose and cut R. Zera's throat. The next day he prayed on his behalf and resurrected (revived?) him.

That the two sages celebrated Purim by becoming drunk points out a significant departure from the standard late antique criterion of holiness, asceticism. In the rabbinical schools the disciples appear to have lived a somewhat ascetic existence. Celibacy was a likely circumstance of their training there.<sup>99</sup> But outside of the academy the sage married, chose edible food and ate it regularly, dressed normally, owned property, lived in villages, and took part in communal life. Although acts of renunciation and fasting are attested among the sages,<sup>100</sup> neither isolation nor extravagant asceticism informs the rabbinic paradigm of holiness.

However, one striking similarity unites the Palestinian/Babylonian sage with contemporary holy men in the late Roman and Byzantine worlds: the visibility of the holy in his person. At the angle of vision were the sage's disciples. As their apprenticeship for elevation to rabbinical status, they were required to wait personally upon the master's needs (ŠYMWŠ TLMYDY ḤKMYM). From the biblical precedent of Elijah and Elisha, R. Simeon b. Yoḥai inferred that attendance upon the master was more important than study itself.<sup>101</sup> In effect the disciples were both students and servants.<sup>102</sup> From this intimate vantage point they could observe the master's conduct in searching detail. His most private habits and activities were subjected to scrutiny. Disciples attended him at the bath house; they studied his bedclothes and imputed

significance to when and how he sneezed.<sup>103</sup> They followed him to the privy and even hid under his bed:<sup>104</sup>

It has been taught: Ben Azzai once said: "Once I went in after R. Akiba to a privy, and I learned three things from him. I learned that one does not evacuate east and west but north and south. I also learned that one evacuates sitting and not standing. I also learned that it is proper to wipe with the left hand and not with the right." Said R. Judah to him: "Have you no shame before your master?" He replied: "It is Torah and I need to learn."

R. Kahana once went and hid under Rab's bed. He heard him conversing playfully and fulfilling his needs (i.e., engaging in marital intercourse)... He (Rab) said to him: "Kahana, are you here? Go out, for it is not proper (DL'W 'WRH 'R'P)." He replied: "It is Torah, and I need to learn."

As the expositor and exemplar of God's revelation, the sage defined its content and its living form. Consequently even his automatic or spontaneous gestures were thought to evince qualities of holiness claiming the disciple's reverent attention.

Decisive evidence of this phenomenon is the sages' own awareness of the normative impact of their private conduct:<sup>105</sup>

It happened that R. Ishmael and R. Eleazar b. Azariah were staying in the same place. R. Ishmael was reclining and R. Eleazar was standing up. When the time arrived to recite the Shema,<sup>106</sup> R. Ishmael stood up and R. Eleazar reclined. R. Ishmael said to him: "What is this, Eleazar?" He replied: "Ishmael, my brother, this may be compared to someone to whom they say, 'On what account is your beard grown so full?' and he replies, 'May it oppose the destroyers.' I was standing up and I reclined; you were reclining and you stood up." He (R. Ishmael) said to him: "You reclined to fulfill the words of Beth Shammai, and I stood up to fulfill the words of Beth Hillel." Or: Lest the disciples *see* (emphasis added) and fix a halakhah according to your words.

Eleazar wishes to fulfill the opinion of Beth Shammai. Ishmael's posture while reciting the Shema accords with the contradictory view of Beth Hillel. For fear that Ishmael's posture might be wrongly construed as mandatory, Eleazar calculates his actions to contradict or, in effect, to neutralize the actions of Ishmael. This is done not for Ishmael's benefit but for the sake of watching disciples. The issue is not which master or House is correct but how the master's behavior will appear to an audience.

Another passage in Tosefta reports:<sup>107</sup>

It happened that our rabbis entered Samaritan villages along the road. They (the Samaritans) brought them vegetables. R. Akiba rushed to tithe them (as if they were) wholly untithed produce. Rabban Gamaliel said to him: "How dare you transgress

the words of your colleagues?" Or, "Who gave you permission to tithe?" He replied: "And have I fixed a halakhah in Israel?" He (Akiba) said to him (further): "I tithed my own vegetables." He (Gamaliel) said to him: "Know that you fixed a halakhah in Israel since you tithed your vegetables."

This is another example of Tosefta's concern for the normative impact of the master's private conduct. Just as R. Eleazar feared the misapprehension of R. Ishmael's posture, so here Rabban Gamaliel fears the misapprehension of R. Akiba's tithe of Samaritan produce. Akiba's view is that merely to tithe his own share of the vegetables is not to establish the practice for all Israel. But Gamaliel holds that even Akiba's private act may be regarded as halakhah.

It is reported in the Palestinian Talmud that R. Hanina once struck someone who failed to rise before him, considering this affront to be a nullification of the Torah (KY B'YTH MBTLH D'WRYTH).<sup>108</sup> The master was the Torah made visible. Disrespect for one was tantamount to disrespect for the other. While the rabbi was not thought to be divine, he is portrayed in rabbinic literature as the conduit of divine authority and the instrument of its transmission. Consequently whatever he taught was revelation, and whatever he did was implementation.

## V

Both the pagan and the Christian holy men were catalysts of profound change in late Roman and Byzantine civilization. Before their appearance, access to the divine was open. In the pagan universe of the philosophers, the One God was well represented on earth by the gods of traditional belief. The self was a hierarchy extending from the sensible to the celestial realm; the chain of intermediaries included *daemones* whose protection could be relied upon even beyond death.<sup>109</sup> At the temples and shrines, by rite and by oracle, the presence of the divine was palpable. Moreover it was not uncommon for human beings to cross over into the zone of the divine. The census of divine beings came to include not only local tutelary powers, minor deities, demigods, and *daemones*, but deceased rulers and public benefactors.<sup>110</sup> *Paideia* itself became a vehicle of apotheosis. In the classical era this distinction was limited to the truly exceptional, such as Pythagoras or Plato; but in Hellenistic and Roman society it was the aspiration of every poet, thinker, and artist to be divinized, to become a "man of the Muses."<sup>111</sup> Since it was the prevailing conception that man was composed of a



divine soul imprisoned in a material body, it followed that all men were essentially divine. Those in whom the divine component was most fully realized—whether prophet or poet, ruler or magician, athlete or physician—were eligible for deification. The boundary between the divine and the human was fluid.

In contrast, the power of the pagan and Christian holy men rested on a new assumption: that access to the supernatural was available only to a select few whose personal holiness was demonstrable and visible. Casual intimacy with the divine was no longer possible, for spiritual power was now confined to the elect. The holy man came to be the divine conduit, the funnel between heaven and earth.

Coextensive with the holy man's ability to communicate divine power was his capacity to defeat the demonic. In a world where men and events were assumed to be manipulated by invisible forces, the holy man stood apart. Ordinary people were possessed by demons; even exceptional persons were subtly possessed, whether they were aware of it or not. But the holy man could not be possessed; more precisely, he was divinely possessed and therefore immune to demons. The late antique vocation of holiness, whether expressed in the practice of theurgy, miracle-working, prophecy or extraordinary intellection, aimed at the assertion of mastery over the unintelligible. This required a unique and clearly discernible intimacy with the divine.

It is especially in this respect that the rabbinic sage, although the product of a far different religious tradition and social milieu, crystallizes a crucial attribute of the holy man: the paradigmatic impact of his person. Down to every detail of his being, the holy man is a divine revelation. The imagery varies. Iamblichus writes that the ideal philosopher reflects God the way a still well reflects the sun.<sup>112</sup> Athanasius describes the ideal monk as God's lamp.<sup>113</sup> The Babylonian Talmud compares the ideal sage to a Torah scroll.<sup>114</sup> The holy man of late antiquity is not merely an imitation of God, but an intimation, visible evidence of the divine marrow of human existence.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, tr. G. Lamb (New York 1956) 98.

<sup>2</sup> Garth Fowden, The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society, *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982) 33-59.

<sup>3</sup> Marrou, *o.c.* 101.

- <sup>4</sup> Peter Brown, *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity*, *Center for Hermeneutical Studies Colloquy* 34 (Berkeley 1980) 7-9.
- <sup>5</sup> Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1983) 28 f., suggests that the philosopher's ascetic style of life was not only a personal but a social expression, identifying his station in society, exciting public admiration, and advertising his freedom from social constraints.
- <sup>6</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris 1981) 13-58 at 45.
- <sup>7</sup> *Vita Plotini* 23, *Plotini opera* 1, ed. Henry and Schwyzer (Oxford 1964), tr. S. MacKenna, *Plotinus: The Enneads* 1-2 (Boston 1948) 24. Porphyry mentions that he too "was once admitted and entered into union."
- <sup>8</sup> *Vita Plotini* 10-11, tr. MacKenna 11-12.
- <sup>9</sup> *Vita Procli* 28, tr. A. N. Oikonomides (Chicago 1977).
- <sup>10</sup> Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, Loeb ed., tr. W. C. Wright (London 1952) 364-65.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 368-71 at 371.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Cox, *Biography in late Antiquity* 34 f.
- <sup>13</sup> *Vita Pythagorae* 1-2.
- <sup>14</sup> However, according to an oracle of Apollo (*Vita Plotini* 22, tr. MacKenna 23), the soul of Plotinus was destined to join that of Pythagoras in the "choir of immortal love."
- <sup>15</sup> *Vita Pythagorae* 28-29, cited in Cox, *o.c.*
- <sup>16</sup> *Vita Pythagorica* 15, ed. Deubner (Teubner 1937), tr. T. Taylor (London 1965) 32.
- <sup>17</sup> *Vita Isidori, Epitoma Photiana* 36, *Damascii Vitae Isidori Reliquiae*, ed. Zintzen (Hildesheim 1967), tr. R. Asmus, *Das Leben des Philosophen Isidoros* (Leipzig 1911) 24.
- <sup>18</sup> Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses* 55:4-5, Loeb. ed., tr. H. Crosby (London 1932).
- <sup>19</sup> Eunapius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 370-71.
- <sup>20</sup> *Vita Procli* 12.
- <sup>21</sup> Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, L'école de Plotin, *Les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres: Christianisme et monde païen*, ed. F. Bovon et al (Geneva 1981) 234, cf. 255-56 n.
- <sup>22</sup> *Vita Plotini* 13, tr. MacKenna 13.
- <sup>23</sup> *Vita Plotini* 1, tr. MacKenna 1.
- <sup>24</sup> Richard Goulet, Les vies des philosophes dans l'antiquité tardive et leur portée mystérique, *Les Actes Apocryphes des Apôtres* 164.
- <sup>25</sup> *Vita Isidori, Epitoma Photiana* 80, tr. Asmus 49-50 According to Iamblichus, Pythagoras would audition disciples by examining their physiognomy, posture, and motion: *Vita Pythagorica* 17, tr. Taylor 37-38.
- <sup>26</sup> *Vita Isidori, Epitoma Photiana* 16, tr. Asmus 10.
- <sup>27</sup> *Vita Pythagorica* 17, tr. Taylor 38.
- <sup>28</sup> *Vita Pythagorica* 15, tr. Taylor 34-35.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ad Marcellam*, ed. Nauck (Teubner 1886), tr. Festugière, *Trois Dévots Païens* 2 (Paris 1944) 33.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ad Marcellam*, tr. Festugière 27-28,
- <sup>31</sup> *Vita Procli* 18, tr. Oikonomides 47-49.
- <sup>32</sup> Peter Brown, *The Philosopher and Society in Late Antiquity* 15.
- <sup>33</sup> Cf. E. A. Judge, The Earliest Use of Monachos for "Monk" (P. Coll. Youtie 77) and the Origins of Monasticism, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 20 (1977) 77-78, 83 n. 31, who suggests (at 78) that the Egyptian monastic vocation "is an expressly socio-political notion, or indeed geo-political, which dares even to conceive of the desert (the home of demons) as a *polis*."

- <sup>34</sup> *Historia Lausiaca* 11:2-3, tr. R. T. Meyer, *The Lausiak History*, Ancient Christian Writers 34 (London 1965) 46-47.
- <sup>35</sup> D. J. Chitty, *The Desert A City* (Oxford 1966) 87.
- <sup>36</sup> *Vita Antonii* 14, tr. R. C. Gregg, *Athanasius* (New York, Toronto 1980) 43.
- <sup>37</sup> Peter Brown, The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, *JRS* 61 (1972) 80-101 = *idem*, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1982) 103-52, cf. 153-65.
- <sup>38</sup> Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass. 1978) 94.
- <sup>39</sup> Robert Browning, The "Low Level" Saint's Life in the Early Byzantine World, *The Byzantine Saint*, University of Birmingham Fourteenth Symposium of Byzantine Studies, ed. S. Hackel, Studies Supplementary to Sobornost 5 (1981) 118.
- <sup>40</sup> *Historia Lausiaca* 48:3, tr. Meyer 131.
- <sup>41</sup> *Vita Antonii* 7, tr. Gregg 36.
- <sup>42</sup> Browning, *o.c.* 120.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>44</sup> *Vita Antonii* 91-92, tr. Gregg 97-98.
- <sup>45</sup> Browning, *o.c.*
- <sup>46</sup> *Praktikos*, 56, 64, 81, tr. J. E. Bamberger, *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer* (Kalamazoo 1981) 31, 33-34, 36.
- <sup>47</sup> *Praktikos* 57, 58, tr. Bamberger 32.
- <sup>48</sup> *Vita Antonii* 14, tr. Gregg 42.
- <sup>49</sup> *Vita Antonii* 15, tr. Gregg 43.
- <sup>50</sup> Theodoret, *Historia Religiosa* (PG 82,1297B).
- <sup>51</sup> John Moschus, *Pratum Spirituale*, cited by Chitty, *The Desert A City* 145.
- <sup>52</sup> Lennart Ryden, The Holy Fool, *The Byzantine Saint* 109-10.
- <sup>53</sup> *Vita Prima Graeca* 88, tr. A. Athanassakis, *Life of Pachomius* (Missoula 1975) 127-29.
- <sup>54</sup> *Vita Prima Graeca* 89, tr. Athanassakis 129.
- <sup>55</sup> Browning, *o.c.* 122.
- <sup>56</sup> Browning, *ibid.*, points out that the ascribed power of bilocation may have its origin in either the holy man's mind or the popular imagination. Some holy men apparently had the sensation of having visited distant places. At the same time, people sometimes claimed to see him in places other than where he was known to be.
- <sup>57</sup> Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* 48, 69.
- <sup>58</sup> E.g., *Vita Prima Graeca* 12; *Historia Lausiaca* 18:6.
- <sup>59</sup> However, the holy man differs from the Christ model in certain attributes, e.g., his powers of longevity, invulnerability, and invisibility; see Browning, *o.c.* 123-24.
- <sup>60</sup> *Vita Prima Graeca* 16, tr. Athanassakis 21.
- <sup>61</sup> *Historia Lausiaca* 47:13-14, tr. Meyer 129.
- <sup>62</sup> *Vita Prima Graeca* 24-25, tr. Athanassakis 29-31.
- <sup>63</sup> Cited in Chitty, *The Desert A City* 70-71.
- <sup>64</sup> *Vita Prima Graeca* 150, tr. Athanassakis 201.
- <sup>65</sup> *Vita Prima Graeca* 14, tr. Athanassakis 19.
- <sup>66</sup> *Historia Lausiaca* 22:7-8, tr. Meyer 78-79.
- <sup>67</sup> *Vita Antonii* introd., tr. Gregg 29.
- <sup>68</sup> *Apophthegm.* Poimen, cited in Philip Rousseau, *Ascetics, Authority and the Church* (Oxford 1978) 21.

<sup>69</sup> *Apophthegm.* Pistos, tr. B. Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (London 1975) 166-67.

<sup>70</sup> *Vita Antonii* 5, tr. Gregg 34.

<sup>71</sup> *Historia Religiosa* (PG 82, 1481A).

<sup>72</sup> *Historia Lausiaca* 48:4, tr. Meyer 131.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* 143: "Merely to see a holy man stirred East Romans deeply."

<sup>74</sup> *Historia Lausiaca* 35:3, tr. Meyer 99.

<sup>75</sup> *Vita Prima Graeca* 25, tr. Athanassakis 31.

<sup>76</sup> *Historia Lausiaca* 18:15, tr. Meyer 62.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. the account of Ammianus Marcellinus upon Constantius' entry into Rome in 357, *Res Gestae* 16, 10:9-10, Loeb ed., tr. J. C. Rolfe (London 1956):

Accordingly, being saluted as Augustus with favoring shouts, while hills and shores thundered out the roar, he (Constantius) never stirred, but showed himself as calm and imperturbable as he was commonly seen in the provinces. For he both stopped when passing through lofty gates (although he was very short) and as if his neck were in a vise, he kept the gaze of his eyes straight ahead, and turned his face neither to right nor left ... neither did he nod when the wheel jolted nor was ever seen to spit, or to wipe or rub his face or nose, or move his hands about.

As noted by S. G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley 1981) 44-45, the emperor's studied immobility had the effect of dissociating him from the multitude, elevating him to the status of a divine image. Cf. concluding paragraph of the present essay.

<sup>78</sup> W. S. Green, What's in a Name?—The Problematic of Rabbinic "Biography," *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice*, ed. W. S. Green (Missoula 1978) 77-96.

<sup>79</sup> M. Ab. 1:1.

<sup>80</sup> Gedalyahu Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World*, tr. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem 1977) 445-56.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. M. Ab. 4:7.

<sup>82</sup> Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* 400 ff.

<sup>83</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Talmudic Judaism in Sasanian Babylonia* (Leiden 1976) 97.

<sup>84</sup> b. Hul. 44b.

<sup>85</sup> b. Ber. 30b-31a.

<sup>86</sup> b. MQ 28a; cf. b. Mak. 10a. According to b. Taan. 20 b, R. Adda b. Ahava kept an old house standing by studying Torah inside of it. When he left, the house collapsed.

<sup>87</sup> This conception has been described by Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews of Babylonia* v. 3 (Leiden 1968) 102-10, 130-49; v. 4 (Leiden 1969) 279-309; v. 5 (Leiden 1970) 146-68.

<sup>88</sup> M. BM 2:11.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. b. Shab. 17a, 51a; b. Sanh. 24a.

<sup>90</sup> b. Er. 99a.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. b. Ber. 31b; b. Er. 63a; Lev. R. 20:6.

<sup>92</sup> b. Yoma 53a.

<sup>93</sup> M. Ab. 4:12.

<sup>94</sup> b. Pes. 112b.

- <sup>95</sup> b. Taan. 24b.
- <sup>96</sup> b. AZ 26a; cf. Saul Lieberman, *Texts and Studies* (New York 1974) 187 f.
- <sup>97</sup> b. Giṭ. 45a.
- <sup>98</sup> b. Meg. 7b.
- <sup>99</sup> Cf. Neusner, *Talmudic Judaism in Sasanian Babylonia* 72.
- <sup>100</sup> See E. E. Urbach, Sage, *Encyclopedia Judaica* 14:653.
- <sup>101</sup> b. Ber. 7b.
- <sup>102</sup> A useful collation of rabbinic texts on the subject is accomplished by M. Aberbach, *The Relations Between Master and Disciple in the Talmudic Age, Essays Presented to Chief Rabbi Israel Brodie*, ed. Zimmels et al (London 1967) 1-24.
- <sup>103</sup> Re: bath house, e.g., y. Ber. 2:3, 4c, b. Shab. 40b-41a; bedclothes and sneezing, e.g., b. Ber. 24a.
- <sup>104</sup> b. Ber. 62a.
- <sup>105</sup> T. Ber. 1:4; cf. T. Ber. 5:2.
- <sup>106</sup> As formulated in M. Ber. 1:1-5, 2:2, the Shema consists of three portions of the Pentateuch together with specified benedictions.
- <sup>107</sup> T. Dem. 5:24.
- <sup>108</sup> y. Bik. 3:3, 65c.
- <sup>109</sup> Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints* (Chicago 1981) 51 f.
- <sup>110</sup> Morton Smith, *Prolegomena to a Discussion of Aretologies, Divine Men, the Gospels and Jesus*, *JBL* 90 (1971) 181 f.
- <sup>111</sup> Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* 101.
- <sup>112</sup> *Vita Pythagorica* 15.
- <sup>113</sup> *Vita Antonii* 93.
- <sup>114</sup> b. Qid. 33b.

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